Experiential Learning and Play in PreK and Kindergarten

Experiential, play-based learning has largely disappeared from kindergartens and is rapidly vanishing from preschools. Pressure to get children reading at ever younger ages has forced teachers to spend long hours on didactic instruction and testing. Many young children respond poorly to this and develop an early sense of frustration and school failure. This is especially hard on at-risk children. Why do we insist on children reading before first grade? There is no evidence that children who read at five (or younger) become better readers than those who begin at six or seven.

When researcher Sebastian Suggate searched widely for data supporting the practice of teaching five-year-olds to read, he found only one study from the 1970’s which he described as being methodologically weak. There was no evidence of long-term gains since that time, a surprising finding given how widespread the belief has become that early reading pays off. Suggate then studied the literacy scores of 15-year-olds who took the PISA exam in 2006 and found no difference in scores for those in countries that teach reading at five and those that start later. This echoed his own research in New Zealand where he compared students who were taught to read at five with those who

**RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE**

**What Is Needed to Restore Play and Experiential Learning?**

**Reexamine the assumption that children should read in kindergarten.** In preschool and kindergarten children need to develop a love of oral language, of books, and the printed word, but drilling them in reading skills can be counterproductive. Instead, they need creative play and rich life experiences that contribute to healthy development and to reading comprehension. The wobbly foundation of current early education policies needs to be replaced with a strong evidence base.

**Teacher education and professional development:** Managing play-rich classrooms requires sophisticated understanding of children’s development, keen observation skills, and practical knowledge of play and playful learning techniques. New resources for early childhood teacher education that support play-based learning and address the needs of modern children, especially English-language learners and those at risk and with disabilities, are of critical importance.

**Sensible kindergarten policies:** One-size-fits-all standards for kindergartners make no sense. Kindergarten guidelines should reflect appropriate learning goals and the facts of child development—e.g., young children learn best through play and active experience. Goals should not be so numerous as to require hours of daily instruction. Assessments should be based on multiple observational measures. Tests should be limited to essential individual screening for developmental delays, and the results should never be the sole or primary criterion for making important decisions. Ample time and resources for play and recess—including blocks and props for make-believe play—should be guaranteed.

**A commitment to research:** Pilot programs for developing rich play-based kindergartens should be designed, implemented, and evaluated. Long-term research on the outcomes of various kindergarten programs, including play-based, should be funded.
began at seven. All scored the same at age eleven on a standardized test. (See http://www.otago.ac.nz/news/news/otago006408.html. A book by Suggate entitled Watering the Garden before the Rainstorm is scheduled for release in 2012.)

• In the 1970’s German kindergartens moved from a play-based approach to one that emphasized cognitive achievement. Researchers compared children from 50 play-based kindergartens and 50 centers for cognitive achievement. By age ten the children who had played in kindergarten excelled over the others in many areas: reading, mathematics, social and emotional adjustment, creativity, intelligence, oral expression, and “industry.” (Linda Darling-Hammond and Jon Snyder, “Curriculum Studies and the Traditions of Inquiry,” Handbook of Research on Curriculum, 1992.)

• Differences in long-term outcomes from experiential versus instructional preschools are profound and can affect every facet of life. In the HighScope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study, low-income at-risk children were randomly divided into three preschool classes. One was instructional and two were play-based. At first the outcomes seemed identical, but the youngsters were followed until age 23. Those from the instructional program suffered far greater problems than those from the play-based classrooms. For example, 47% of children from the instructional program needed special education compared to only 6% from the play-based groups. By age 23, 34% of the former had been arrested for a felony offense compared with 9% of the others, and more than 25% of the former were suspended from work, compared with fewer than 7% of those who attended play-oriented preschools. (Schweinhart and Weikart, HighScope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study, 1997.) Nevertheless, our preschools and kindergartens increasingly look like the instructional program that created such lasting problems for at-risk children.

• Walter Gilliam of Yale found high rates of expulsion from preschool, especially for boys, and he found a strong correlation between preschool expulsion and lack of time for dramatic play in the classroom. (Gilliam spoke of the relationship between expulsion and lack of play at a presentation at the NAEYC Professional Development Institute, Charlotte, NC, June 2009. For his original study see. “Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems.” (2005) New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center.)

• The American Academy of Pediatrics considers play to be an essential activity and says “It could be argued that active play is so central to child development that it should be included in the very definition of childhood.” In its 2012 policy statement on play, the AAP expresses particular concern that children in low-income communities have far too little time for play because their parents’ lives are often stressed, their neighborhoods are frequently unsafe, and there are few parks and playgrounds available. (Milteer, Ginsburg, et. al., “The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond: Focus on Children in Poverty” (2012). It is especially important that the education of low-income children include rich opportunities for play.

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The Alliance for Childhood is a nonprofit partnership of educators, health professionals, and other advocates for children who are concerned about the decline in children’s health and well-being.

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